

VZCZCXRO3407
OO RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHMK #0265/01 0820905
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 230905Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6591
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 1310
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 0668
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 0910
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 1192
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0990
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0901
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 3590
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 2643
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000265

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/22/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: "SPRING OF CULTURE" IGNITES RHETORICAL BATTLE
BETWEEN ISLAMISTS AND MODERATES

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The elected lower house Council of Representatives (COR), which is dominated by Islamist deputies, voted overwhelmingly March 20 to form a committee to investigate the "Spring of Culture," a six-week cultural festival, which they complained included a performance that was "immoral and against Islam." MP Mohammed Khalid said he was not against the festival itself but thought it should consist of poetry recitals and lectures "like cultural events held in Saudi Arabia." The MPs' move provoked a reaction from supporters of arts and culture, including 25 members of the upper house Shura Council, who signed a petition backing cultural and intellectual activities and condemning political powers who try to "strangle freedom and creativity." Liberals, who had been mostly quiet for well over a year, issued a joint statement signed by 53 civil society organizations defending the festival. Prominent editors-in-chief wrote supportive columns. Although moderates had been in retreat, the parliamentary attacks on the Spring of Culture awakened them and they are making their presence felt by speaking out loudly and clearly against religious interference in cultural affairs. End Summary.

The Spring of What?

¶2. (U) Twenty-nine of the 34 Council of Representatives deputies present March 20, representing all parliamentary blocs, voted in favor of forming a committee to investigate the "Spring of Culture," a six-week festival organized the Ministry of Information Assistant Under Secretary for Cultural and National Heritage Shaikha May bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa. The five other deputies present abstained. The festival, sponsored by the Economic Development Board and national telecommunications company Batelco, was launched March 1 with a two-night production by Lebanese singer/musician Marcel Khalifa, accompanied by Bahraini poet Qassem Haddad and a Lebanese dance troupe performing the traditional Arab folk tale "Laila and the Madman."

¶3. (U) The MPs objected to Khalifa's interpretation of the story, which they claim included apparently sexually explicit

movements by the dancers during a section of the tale dealing with Laila's adultery. Sunni Al Minbar MP Mohammed Khalid called the event the "Spring of Foolishness" and condemned the performance as immoral and against Islam. Other MPs have called the festival the "Spring of Sex." "The actions of the dancers was clearly meant to depict a sexual act," he complained. "I am not against the Spring of Culture festival itself, but no Muslim, be he Shia or Sunni, can accept this kind of behavior masquerading as art." Khalid said the festival should consist of poetry recitals and lectures "like the cultural events held in Saudi Arabia," which conform to Islamic and Arab values. Al Minbar bloc president and COR second deputy speaker Salah Ali protested the "sleazy dance moves" and offered that the festival had lost sight of its goal, which was to open up to other cultures. (EmbOffs who attended the show acknowledge that the dancers' performance was suggestive.)

¶4. (U) Preachers from both the Sunni and Shia sects supported the MPs' moves. Sunni Shaikh Ali Mattar, a member of the COR in the previous parliamentary session and member of the Salafi Al Asala bloc, complained in his March 16 Friday prayer sermon that "the Spring of Culture featured a play with scenes that arouse sexual instincts and encourage debauchery." Leading Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem announced in his sermon, "The Spring of Culture is an open invitation to seduction under the guise of love, in defiance of this country's religion, taboos, and values."

An Announcement of Love

MANAMA 00000265 002 OF 003

¶5. (U) In response to the March 20 vote, which had been expected, musician Khalifa and poet Haddad issued a joint statement entitled, "We came to announce love." They denounced the formation of the investigative committee and praised those who stood against the MPs. They said, "Our goal was not to stimulate the base instincts. We never thought that the innocent, clean performance would be interpreted by some as the opposite of what was intended. Those who are waging a campaign against the performance in fact aim to terrorize and oppress all forms of intellect and culture."

¶6. (U) The upper house (appointed) Shura Council weighed in March 19, in anticipation of the COR vote. Twenty-five of the 30 members present signed a petition in support of the festival and called for MPs to back away from their intention to form an investigative committee. The petition read, "We fully back all cultural and intellectual activities, which have a strong message, especially those calling for enlightenment, modernization, and enhancing artistic and literary taste." The statement continued, "We strongly condemn political powers, parliament in particular, who are trying to strangle freedom and creativity as if they were assigned as caretakers of people's choices and are dividing the community with things outside of their authority."

The Liberals Awaken

¶7. (U) The controversy stirred Bahrain's moderates and liberals, who had been mostly quiet for well over year. Fifty-three Bahraini civil society organizations issued a joint statement March 19 condemning the parliamentary investigative committee and defending culture and creativity. Adel Fakhro, a prominent businessman and leader of the "Lana Haq" (We Have a Right) movement, which was formed in December 2005 to protect individual and civil liberties, said parliament's unprecedented move to "put culture on trial" could usher in a "very dangerous situation in which personal freedoms are subject to the approval of parliamentary

committees." Theater director Khalid Al Rowaie said, "This is a dangerous precedent that will take us back to the Middle Ages and the Inquisition." Fatima Bu Idrees, a board member of the Bahrain Young Ladies Association, told the press, "Do we need to silence culture more than it already is? As representatives of the people, (members of parliament) should encourage people to learn about other cultures."

¶8. (U) High-profile editors-in-chief Isa Al Shaiji (Al Ayam) and Anwar Abdul Rahman (Akhbar Al Khaleej) wrote front page editorials on the situation. Al Shaiji March 18 urged courageous Bahraini voices that defend freedoms, tolerance, and pluralism to speak up and protect the rights of the people to enjoy the beauty of art and culture. He hoped that policy makers listen to these voices because they represent a wide sector of Bahraini society that believes in the essence of democracy. On March 21, he warned that press freedom was next on the list of parliamentary deputies who want to curb culture and creativity. He proudly praised the position of the Shura Council and civil society groups in support of freedom of expression. Abdul Rahman March 17 asked, "Sirs, who appointed you guardians of the people? If you insist on acting as guardians of the people, you will push the people into a state of unconsciousness and torpor from which they will never awake."

¶9. (U) Cartoonists also joined in. Khalid Al Hashmi of Al Ayam drew a picture of a welcome mat labeled "culture" in front of the doors of parliament, where deputies wipe their shoes before entering the chamber. Abdullah Al Muharraqi of Akhbar Al Khaleej showed a traditionally dressed male MP waving his finger at a songbird fully covered by an abaya and niqab (the black robe and face-covering worn by some Arab women) and chained to its perch, demanding that it "sing and move my emotions."

Comment

MANAMA 00000265 003 OF 003

¶10. (C) Moderates and liberals have been in retreat since being mostly ignored during the 2006 campaign season and winning few seats in the November/December parliamentary and municipal elections. Although it took a provocative step by parliament to reawaken them, they have made their presence felt by speaking out loudly and clearly against religious interference in cultural affairs. Bahrain has a tradition of openness and tolerance belied by the overwhelming presence of Islamists in the COR. Many are happy to see the moderates jumping into the fray. Crown Prince Salman told the Ambassador March 18 "it's about time the liberals are pushing back."

Visit Embassy Manama's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/manama/>

MONROE